

Defending No Trump Contracts

Which Card do you Lead?

Once you have selected the suit you wish to lead, you need to choose which card to play. This is an important decision because you are trying to give your partner information about the suit you are leading. How else will partner know whether to continue the suit or try something else?



With a Short Suit (Two or Three Cards)

When you lead a short suit, you are most likely looking for partner's long suit. It may be that partner has bid the suit or you have deduced partner's suit from the auction.

With a **two card suit** it is easy. Lead the higher card.

With a **three card suit**, it is not so easy.

- With **three worthless cards** such as 9 4 3, lead the highest card.
In general, leading a highish card but not an honour tells partner you have no good cards in the suit.
(Some people play a system called middle-up-down or MUD. They lead the middle card and when the suit is played again, the highest card. If you are doing this, you need to discuss it with your partner.)
- With **one honour and two low cards** such as Q 4 3, lead the lowest card.
By leading a low card, you are telling partner you have an honour in the suit.
- With **two adjacent honours** such as Q J 3, lead the higher honour.
If you lead the low card first, you are in danger of blocking the suit. Imagine partner has K 8 7 6 5 and no outside entry. If you lead the three, partner plays the king to force out declarer's ace. That leaves the queen and jack as winners but partner's last two cards in the suit may go to waste.
- With two **non-adjacent honours** such as K J 3, usually lead the lower honour.
If the non adjacent honours include the ten as in K T 3, lead the lowest card instead.
In the first case, the lead of the jack is an attempt to avoid blocking the suit. This is a difficult lead for partner to recognise but it is the best you can do.

With a Long Suit (Four or more Cards)

Now, you are trying to establish your own suit.

- If the suit is headed by a **perfect honour sequence** such as K Q J or Q J T, lead the highest card. To be considered a perfect sequence, there must be at least three adjacent cards.
- If the suit is headed by a **near perfect honour sequence** such as K Q T or Q J 9, lead the highest card. Note that "near perfect" means that the top two honours are adjacent and there is a gap of just one to the next card.

- If the suit has an **internal honour sequence** such as A Q J or A J T or K T 9, lead the second highest honour. Internal honour sequences can be hard to recognise. They start with a high honour. Then there is a gap of one or two cards. Then another honour and an adjacent card.
A holding like Q 9 8 3 is not an internal honour sequence because the nine is not an honour.
- If you have one or more honours but don't have one of the honour sequences, lead your **fourth highest** card in the suit. As before, a low card promises an honour.
- With **four worthless cards**, usually lead the highest card. If the highest card is a nine, lead the second highest instead; the nine may be too valuable to waste.

Why Lead Fourth Highest?

By leading your fourth highest card, you may well be giving declarer an easy trick. You are hoping that both declarer and dummy have three or less cards in your suit. Eventually, your small cards in the suit will become winners. So your gain out-weighs your loss.

As we will see in the next few weeks, a fourth highest lead helps partner work out who has all the key cards in the suit.

Why Lead Top of a Sequence?

By leading the king from the top of a sequence you will eventually force out declarer's ace and set up two or more tricks for the defence. With the lead of a queen, you need to get rid of the ace and the king before you start scoring tricks. On a good day, your partner will have one of these and then, declarer has only one stopper that needs to be dislodged.

A top-of-sequence lead also gives partner some information about your holding in the suit. For example, when you lead a queen, partner will know you don't have the king but do have the jack.

Leading Against a Slam

When the opponents have bid 6NT, things change a lot. Now, you are not trying to establish a long suit. You are simply trying to take two tricks to beat the contract. You are looking for a safe lead that does not give declarer a free trick. Usually, it is best not to lead away from an honour.

Leading "Top of Partner's Suit"

Some people like to lead the highest card in partner's suit. I don't recommend this unless your holding happens to be a doubleton. It is better to make your normal lead. Partner will then be better placed to work out your holding in the suit.